

Adjournment Debate - 19th January 2010

'ELECTRICITY TRANSMISSION IN NORTH SOMERSET'

Speech by Dr Liam Fox - MP for Woodspring

For those unfamiliar with this issue let me briefly explain the background. In preparation for the Hinkley C nuclear power station coming on stream later this decade, National Grid intend to introduce new 400kv overhead cables to connect Hinkley C with Avonmouth. The intent is to link two coastal points by a land based pylon system. The new pylons will be around 46m tall- each the height of Nelson's column and will cut through the countryside of North Somerset.

This debate is about the villages and towns such as Nailsea, Yatton, Backwell, Wraxall, my own village of Tickenham, the Gordano valley and others that will be affected.

It is about a consultation that is not really a consultation at all and about a definition of cost which includes only short-term financial measurements and not wider measures of public interest such as environment, safety, green belt or the impact on property values.

It is also about a decision making process which has at its core a democratic deficit where decisions are made by unelected quango chiefs and are unaccountable to ordinary citizens.

We all understand the need for more electricity and that it has to have a transmission network. The public meeting that we held in Nailsea with National Grid was an object lesson in reason and good manners despite the anger felt by so many in our area. I must say I am deeply proud of local pressure groups and local residents for the dignity and self restraint with which they have handled themselves.

The consultation process we have been given has been between two different land corridors with overhead cables. It is not much of a consultation. The choice between being hanged and beheaded doesn't boil down to much choice at all. Furthermore, there is a strong suspicion that the second option-corridor two- clearly represented environmental vandalism of such a degree that it was bound to be violently objected to. This always had the potential for the drawing of the false conclusion that corridor one was supported and furthermore, leaving local residents split.

What we want to see is a genuine consultation that compares the wider costs and benefits of overhead cables with undersea and underground cables.

The Optioneering Report shows that National Grid discarded a number of undersea options before the public consultation started. Despite asking for further information about the technical, environmental and cost considerations of placing the cables undersea we still have not been given answers which explain clearly why two coastal points should be linked by over-land power lines.

We understand that there are technical issues but, if these can be overcome elsewhere, then why not here too? National Grid's depreciation policy states that assets such as cables and pylons are depreciated over a period of up to 50 years so investment needs to be assessed not simply as initial cost but spread over all consumers who benefit and over 50 years.

One overground option which has been trailed is to follow the M5 route. This, to me, is no solution at all and simply moves the problem on to the residents of the Gordano

valley and Portishead who would have their local environment permanently damaged.

Likewise, I do not support the addition of a 400kV line parallel to the two existing 132kV lines.

For a decision of this importance and magnitude, we do not believe that National Grid has carried out as thorough and adequate a consultation with the public as they should have. If an inappropriate decision is reached as a result of this, we believe National Grid's approach would be challengeable and I would like the Government to set out their view on this matter tonight. What would be the process of judicial review, at what point could it be triggered, how and by whom?

We expect Government to ensure that the rights of small communities are not steamrollered by the short term interests of large utilities. No one questions the right, even duty, of National Grid to do the best it can for its shareholders but the short term benefit of shareholders cannot be bought at the exclusion of the long term cost to individuals, communities and the environment that this proposal brings.

A Severn Estuary route or a route underground cannot be ruled out on purely costs grounds. These options should be properly explored and communicated.

Another issue is the unknown quantity of safety. The size of the proposed pylons is 46 metres. We all recognise that the issues concerning the impact of electric and magnetic fields (EMFs) are complicated and potentially open to a range of interpretations. Given the confused nature of the advice currently available we believe that it would be sensible for National Grid to adopt a cautious stance -the 'precautionary principle'. This would avoid the positioning of pylons and power lines in close proximity to homes, public rights of way, community routes and schools and colleges where land based lines are in use. We welcome National Grid's assurances on this but this should not be interpreted in any way as an acceptance in principle of the currently proposed routes.

Finally, we come to the democratic deficit. I am extremely grateful to Mr.Speaker for granting time for this debate tonight. Under the current Government's legislation, no Minister is actually responsible for these decisions. It is left to the unelected Chairman of a quango to decide on the environmental, safety and economic decisions that will

affect the well being of my constituents. What sort of democracy do we now live in?

That is why if there is a change of government at the election a future Conservative government will restore the democratic link and ensure that decisions like this are taken by a Secretary of State accountable to the people through Parliament.

In conclusion, before resorting to above-ground routes, the company should be obliged to investigate other options, including undersea and underground corridors, fully and properly; the Optioneering Report is not sufficient for this purpose. Above all none of us understand the logic of a recommendation that two coastal points should be linked by over-land power lines, especially when National Grid's own Chief Executive has described the proposed 'Western Undersea Grid' (linking Merseyside and Scotland) as a 'no-brainer'. The feasibility of an undersea route along the Severn Channel must be explored. Money should not be the critical factor in determining this matter (or other route options), particularly when costs can ultimately be shared across consumers who will benefit from the grid connection over a longer period.

We cannot stand by and watch our countryside ravaged by the 46 metre high graffiti of this pylon scheme or our property values threatened.

All members of the House of Commons should take note of this debate. Today it is North Somerset in the firing line. Others will follow.